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ABSTRACT

Two papers presented at two different conferences and both discussing issues related to writing across the curriculum, are presented in this document. The first paper, "Wanted: Guidelines for Teaching Writing in Non-Writing Courses," (Jan Keessen), presented at the 1992 "four C's" conference, discusses the need to gather data on problems in students' written communication encountered by professors in many disciplines, and then to create interdisciplinary guidelines for more effective teaching of writing. The second paper, "WAC--An Answer to Multicultural Diversity," (Marjorie Ann White), presented at the 1991 Minority Student Today conference, points out the utility of writing across the curriculum in the chemistry classroom, and offers several practical writing ideas. (SR)

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WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Wanted: Guidelines for Teaching Writing in Non-Writing Courses

by Jan Keessen

WAC--An Answer to Multicultural Diversity

by Marjorie Ann White

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WANTED: Guidelines for Teaching Writing in Non-Writing Courses

We have a problem in the small liberal arts college where I teach: how to teach writing in non writing courses. As a new faculty member, I first encountered this problem at Augustana College this fall when I began reading the critical essays of students in the senior class I taught on Modern British Fiction. Up until that time, I had every reason to believe that the students would hand in quality papers. The college enjoys a good reputation; the class was spirited; and many of the students were English and writing majors. Yet few of them wrote well. They failed to command the ability to make a point worth making and support it. They lacked the skill to summon information and present it in a coherent manner. They not only failed to analyze critically, they also failed to organize effectively. Moreover, in several instances, they even made errors in grammar and syntax.

Those same problems surfaced again in the winter quarter when I taught the sophomore American literature survey course. By that time, it came as no surprise to me that other professors in other disciplines were perplexed by similar concerns. Some even showed me student papers that had frustrated them and expressed the concern that although they were not teachers of writing, they were confronted with all of the conundrums of how to get their students to write effectively.

Some of their concerns were determined by the discipline they taught. Professors in the hard sciences and in the business school are looking for writing that is succinct and precise. "State the exact truth as simply as you can," says biology teacher, Bo Dziadyk. "Don't be superfluous. Don't be verbose. Don't use lots of adjectives. Don't use unnecessary words like 'different species. The word species already indicates that the groupings are different."

Succinct writing was also demanded by an individual who supervises business writers. "Distill it," he insists. "Let them know what's coming and let them know they've had it. Business writing entails three straightforward steps: 1) the Introduction where you tell them what you are going to say; 2) the body where you tell them and 3) the conclusion where you tell them what you told them."

Another business executive emphasizes that clarity, precision, and brevity are vital to business writing because transactions are so fast-paced that executives can allow themselves only limited time to read. "No matter how much time I have spent on a project," she said, "I wouldn't think of turning it in without an executive summary so that my boss can immediately learn what I am proposing." She added the following analogy: When I was a child in the South, we used to play a game called Hot Jump Rope. The rope would be turning very fast and the idea was to jump in quickly go through the paces and jump out without getting scorched. Business writing is a lot like that. You jump in, make your point, and quickly jump out without getting scorched and without tripping up the whirlwind of activity around you.

Although scientists and business professionals stress brevity considerably more than those in the humanities, professionals in all of the disciplines voice universal concern when they insist that students need to learn how to make a thesis, or make a point, and support it. The Academic Dean of our school who also teaches a course in social studies says, "Students need to lean to do more than summarize." Larry of the communication department says, "Students must get beyond the summarizing and understand the perimeters of analysis. They confuse voices by summarizing a text and then tack on their own voice in the concluding paragraph. This carries over into oral communication as well. They can present arguments but fail to support them." Those in technical communication complain, students are smart, they can command an entire network of electronic symbols, but they can't say it in plain English, they can't communicate in layman's terms, they can't choose the right words, and they can't organize. And these problems carry over into another arena because when called upon, they can't give oral presentations and assert an identifiable point. It's as though they can't bridge the gap between writing and communicating. Scientists at the college voice similar complaints when they point out that the nature of science is good tight logic. If students can't make a point and support it, they are doomed.

And in some ways we as teachers of rhetoric are doomed if we can't enjoy greater effectiveness as teachers of writing. Clearly there is an interdisciplinary cry for more effective writing. What is not so clear is how to respond to that need. While everybody agrees writers must be concise and must make points and support them, nobody has designed a flawless method to insure positive results. Perhaps no one ever can. But as long as the need exists, it would be foolhardy to quit trying.

What I would like to do today is to add to some of the data I have begun to collect regarding the need for interdisciplinary guidelines. What I have in mind is to try to gauge as accurately as possible the problems professors encounter in written communication. I plan to run a few workshops on my campus to garner that kind of information; and in a moment I would like to hear some of your concerns. But first let me relate to you the kinds of concerns that have surfaced so far.

Technology is rapidly changing writing in a variety of ways. FAX machines and electronic mail increase the demand for terse, precise diction. Yet writing that is too blunt or abrupt may well raise issues of etiquette. How curt can communication be without appearing rude? Concerns about etiquette can also influence writing by scholars and professors who communicate internationally. What is concise writing for one culture may well seem rude to another.

So the concern with a writer's audience continues to require careful consideration on our part. Who is the audience? How sophisticated is it? How can we prepare students to write effectively for varied audiences?

Just as audiences vary, so does the writing in different courses. What constitutes a point in one course may well be considered as mere paraphrase or summary in another. And what serves as an acceptable analysis at a freshman or sophomore level may not be academic enough for junior or senior level writing. Upper level students can face yet another problem when by the nature of their discipline they have not been expected to engage in significant writing for quite some time and are suddenly faced with a major writing project.

Another issue that can vary between disciplines is that of documenting. Do you emphasize documenting or arguing? Some disciplines privilege argument over data. Others expect just the opposite. And, of course the ugly underbelly of documenting turns up issues of plagiarism. Different disciplines document by different guidelines.

Finally, professors are perplexed as how to teach students to revise papers. One complained that he was reduced to acting as a student editor. He would edit mistakes, students would correct them, but they failed to use his editing as impetus for more serious analysis. Unfortunately, his admonishing inspired only superficial corrections. Others fear revision sessions because they do not know how to teach writing. Still others lack an efficient method and find the entire revision process tedious, frustrating and counterproductive. And some are hampered by what they see as a psychic investment: I offered advise on this paper. The student rewrote it. I am an effective teacher. Therefore the revision has to be an improvement. But many times the improvements are marginal. Yet I somehow feel obligated to raise the grade.

Clearly, the demands for more effective teaching of writing exist. The problem is: how to answer them. What I hope to do is to gather more specific data and see if I can adopt an effective program here. I have used a variety of writing pedagogy and feel that Chicago's Schoolhouse has the capability to address many of these concerns. The authors of the LRS have created a Brief Guide to revising papers. I plan to rely on it for starters, and I hope to adapt it to the needs of our campus. Next year I hope to present what I compiled and report on whether or not it was successful. And now I'd like to hear from you.

WAC--AN ANSWER TO MULTICULTURAL DIVERSITY

Marjorie Ann White, Ph.D.

STATEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

Students from multicultural backgrounds a) learn by doing--not just listening; hence, WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) is particularly applicable to their needs, b) need self-discipline according to some form of just and equitable work ethic, c) need frequent, positive interaction with teachers and student peers, d) have special educational deficiencies, such as short attention span, inability to take succinct class notes, language and composition barriers, and low self-concept, coupled with anxiety and insecurity in a content-loaded course like chemistry.

WAC, with proper direction, provides the education pedagogy for dealing with all of the above-mentioned problems. Moreover, it presents a student-centered, curriculum-centered program. The typical "prima donna, erudite lecture" type pedagogy is out. Teacher centered instruction plays only a minor role. The textbook, pencil, and paper become major teaching tools.

TRAINING IN TECHNICAL WRITING

Every chemistry student needs expertise in technical writing. WAC is especially helpful here. If properly administered, one does not need an additional credit course in technical writing in the student's degree plan. WAC makes frequent use of a variety of pencil and paper experiences during the "lecture" period and in the three-hour weekly lab. Nor do all these written specimens need correction by the teacher. However, some form of self-

monitoring or peer-monitoring should be arranged, lest the student finds himself/herself reinforcing his/her own bad habits.

SOME PRACTICAL WAC TECHNIQUES

a) Use of response sheets. The teacher lectures briefly on a topic from the text. Students note textual material also, and possibly even highlight the theory in the book. The teacher, in Socratic fashion, directs poignant, relevant questions to the students and requires short, numbered, written responses. Immediate, verbal feedback is required from volunteers, after a reasonable number of questions has been addressed. Papers are submitted after class for credit.

b) Use of mini-lab reports. A brief, well-established experiment is chosen from the student's laboratory manual. The student is supplied with an individual kit of chemicals and apparatus. Students identify the chemicals, read the manual (with direction from the teacher, if necessary), and perform the experiment. Each student is given about 5 minutes to write a brief report of chemicals used, procedure followed, and practical conclusions. Students may consult lab manual, if necessary, but not each other. Students may exchange papers, work in groups for correction, or submit to teacher for grade.

c) Reading and organizing lab directions before attempting to perform manual tasks. Students are asked to scan the written directions for the lab and to number and underline in pencil each verb (action word) that requires a physical action or mental judgment on the part of the student. The scan might yield a sequence like: 1) Weigh --- , 2) Add --- , 3) Remove ---, etc.

This is especially helpful in a chemistry lab, since one step omitted can quickly terminate an experiment, sometimes with dire consequences for student and surroundings!

d) Student use of solution key. Students are required to purchase a solution key containing 50% of the problems in the text. The key may be used by students when teacher assigns homework. They may also use it on problem tests to provide models of standard forms for solving chemistry problems. Students are given grade points for following the model solution. Test problems are similar to, but not identical with, those in the solution key.

WORK ETHIC

In the workplace, a just and equitable slogan is: "An honest day's work for an honest day's pay." In the classroom, this translates to focused learning (WAC, Technique 8) on the part of the student, teacher directed; homework assignments carefully done and on time; regular class attendance; cooperation with peers, faculty, and staff in maintaining the learning environment. Faculty work ethics is determined by institutional policy and job description, which, hopefully, address minority concerns.